Cinema of Despair : Exploring Bernardo Bertolucci's The Dreamers

The Dreamers (2003), directed by Bernardo Bertolucci, tells the story of an American student, Matthew, in his early twenties, who becomes involved in the protests at the Cinémathèque Française after Henri Langlois is dismissed. This opening scene not only captures the charged political climate of Paris in 1968 but also highlights the characters' profound passion for cinema as a form of resistance, which becomes both a refuge and a source of a quiet despair as they seek meaning in an unstable world. It is during this moment that Matthew meets the French twins, Théo and Isabelle, setting the stage for their intense and unconventional relationship. The film is an adaptation of Gilbert Adair's novel *The Holy Innocents,* with Adair contributing to the screenplay and remaining closely involved throughout the production.

After the opening protests, Matthew becomes drawn into the lives of Théo and Isabelle, who are as enigmatic as they are charismatic. The three quickly retreat into the twins' Paris appartement, creating a private world where the rules of society barely exist. On the surface, their days are filled with films, games and playful dares, yet beneath this seemingly innocent routine lies a subtle despair: a yearning for connection and freedom that reality continually denies. Théo and Isabelle challenge Matthew's boundaries. They introduce him to a mix of eroticism, loyalty and freedom that

both thrills and unsettles him. As their relationships intertwine, the film examines how youth can construct a temporary utopia. Yet such a world is fragile, ultimately threatened by both outside reality and the emotional intensity and the inevitable despair of their confined lives.

As their secluded life deepens, a sensually charged intimacy is potrayed when the trio ventures out to the city, attempting to recreate *Bande à part* in the Louvre. Bertolucci stages the sequence with remarkable beauty and long precision, using long, flowing shots that allow the characters to move gracefully among the timeless artworks. The scene is clearly inspired by Jean-Luc Godard, one of the pioneers of French New Wave cinema and echoes his playful yet philosophical approach to space, movement and human interaction. Surrounded by art, Théo, Matthew and Isabelle are both awed and liberated, treating the museum as another stage for their games and fantasies. Yet even amid this beauty and freedom, there is an undercurrent of despair: their playful liberation cannot erase the looming intrusion of reality and the fragility of the world they have created.

Throughout the film, Bertolucci portrays Matthew as a naïve young man who seems content to live in the shadow of the twins. Théo and Isabelle, unable to exist apart from one another, beckon Matthew into their world almost as an extension of their own intimacy. He becomes both a participant and an observer in their incestuous bond, something the film depicts with striking openness. The omelet scene, which I find incredibly fascinating, shows how even the most mundane acts can carry deep emotional and symbolic weight within their private universe. Matthew drifts through this world almost unconsciously, enamored with Isabelle and the strange, intertwined relationship of the three. Yet a quiet despair grows as he observes the limitations of their insular life.

As the story develops, there is a scene where Matthew tries to share a private moment with Isabelle, hinting at a more conventional romance, as if he might finally step out of the shadows and claim a connection just between the two of them. Yet Isabelle inevitably returns to Théo after their intimacy in her room, revealing that the twins' bond is inseperable and that Matthew can never fully escape his position as the third corner in their triangle. In this moment, Mathhew begins to realize that he is the one looking from the outside, painfully aware of the twins' insular existence. The twins, by contrast, are trapped in kind of arrested development: a life of intense desire yet unfulfilled dreams, a despair of never truly stepping into the world.

The climax of the conundrum in *The Dreamers* occurs when they spend a night together in a child-like tent in the living room while the entire Parisian flat is in disarray. Early in the morning, their parents arrive and are shocked by what they see. They quickly realize what is happening and attempt to leave quietly to avoid being noticed. However, this moment depicts how their parents choose to abandon the twins because their self-determined way of living, considering it a form of autonomy. When Isabelle realizes that their parents are leaving, she turns on the gas in the Parisian flat as an act of philosophical suicide, provoked by the crushing despair of remaining in a dream too long. It also foreshadows the intrusion of reality and its consequences, reflecting the political unrest outside (Paris, 1968).

As Mathhew hears the riots outside, the three finally step out od their apartement and join the protesters. This moment marks the collapse of their isolated world and the intrusion of the reality they had long ignored. The tension between Matthew and Théo captures the heart of the ending, Matthew believes in peace and dialogue, while Théo insists that real revolution requires violence. Their argument mirrors the chaos between idealism and action, between dreams and the violent pulse of politics.

Théo's act of throwing Molotov cocktail illustrates the emotional detonation inside their Parisian flat. Is it the destruction of the word they have created, their dream literally goes up in flames. Matthew's decision to finally walk away, leaving the twins behind, feels like an awakening. He steps out of their enclosed fantasy and into the real world, no longer a dreamer.

For Théo and Isabelle, joining the crowd is tragically poetic. They dissolve into the smoke and confusion of the protest, swallowed by the very revolution they once only talked about. The final image of burning streets filled with youth and rage captures the spirit of 1968: the end of innocence and the moment when passion turns into history.

In the end, *The Dreamers* is not simply a story of rebellion, it is about youth itself that fragile space between innocence and awakening. Bertolucci captures the beauty and danger of idealism, where art and desire become both a refuge and a form of escape. Still beneath the allure of their private world resides a persistent and inescapable despair, the inevitable loneliness and futility of living too long within a dream and the realization that even dreams steeped in beauty and passion cannot fully shield them from the pain of reality. The twin's enclosed world embodies the ideologies od 1968, a generation dreaming of revolution but trapped within its own illusions. Through Matthew's quiet awakening, Bertolucci reminds us that every dream must eventually confront reality and that growing up, whether in love, art or politics, means learning that freedom is never without consequence and that even our most cherished dreams carry the shadow of despair.